

Loving Kindness, Compassion, Joy and Equanimity; the four “Divine Abodes” in the Pāli and Sanskrit traditions

A brief introduction to the practises of a *satpurusha*

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Introduction:

While in modern times education consists increasingly in preparation for worldly success, classical education was very different. Our ancestors focussed rather on the cultivation of the qualities of a well-rounded “virtuous person”. This is in spite of the fact that the father of modern education, John Amos Comenius, insisted that the aim of education was to pass on the values of a good person from generation to generation. In the Classical Indian tradition also, the transmission of the virtues of a “good person” (Sanskrit; *satpurusha*) lay at the core of the educational system. Among the most highly regarded of these we find the principle of *ahimsa*, non-violence, a core value in all major Indian spiritual traditions. We find it especially emphasised in Jainism, Hinduism, and of course Buddhism. In the latter, we can even say that at the heart of non-violence are four fundamental qualities of our humanity; loving kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity.

These four “superior dwellings” or “divine abodes” (*brahmaviharas*) have a special place in the Buddhist philosophical tradition, and are the topic of our discussion here. It is a very broad topic, so we will limit ourselves to a brief introduction to their development and practise, and will do so from the perspective of both the Pāli and Sanskrit Traditions. We will draw sometimes on the Chinese versions of these texts, both the *agamas* (translations from the Pāli canon) and the Mahayāna literature (that mostly recorded in Sanskrit) to help illuminate their meaning. We will see how in Buddhism the meaning of a basic concept, founded on the earliest teachings, came to be wonderfully developed and expanded to encompass a much greater scope.

On the Pāli and Sanskrit textual traditions

We know that in Magadha at the time of the Buddha the spoken language was a prakrit, related to Pāli, and we know that the monk who transmitted to Sri Lanka the Buddha Dharma did so in Pāli, yet this day we do not have a scholarly consensus about the original language of the Buddha. Yet, there seems to be no doubt that the tradition of the *agamas* is the closest record we have of the original teachings of the Buddha. Though compiled at *Alu Vihara* in Sri Lanka some 500 years after the Buddha’s death, the *agamas* remain our best record of the words of the Buddha. We also know that while he was alive the Buddha discouraged the teaching of the Dharma in Sanskrit, as this would make it accessible only to an elite Brahmin minority. This was despite the fact that many of his most prominent disciples such as Śāriputra came from well educated Brahmin families. For this reason the Southern Schools (those based on the Pāli texts) to this day prefer not to emphasise the Sanskrit tradition, also known as the Northern Schools.

Sanskrit is also a challenging language to learn, however if one takes the time to make a thorough study of the Northern School textual tradition it is very worthwhile. Beginning in the 1st century BCE, the important part of the Sanskrit tradition with which we are concerned here is really that of its early formulation. This part of the tradition deals with the practises of the Bodhisattva. These texts are very numerous and voluminous, making their study daunting at first, but at their core are very important ideas and practises for the understanding of Buddhism as a whole.

Two paths; disciples and bodhisattvas

We can even go so far as to say that in order to understand Buddhism we need to understand not only the practise of the disciples, preserved in the Pāli tradition, but we also need to understand the practise of the bodhisattvas, also known as the *prajñaparamita* or “transcendental wisdom” tradition, which was largely recorded in Sanskrit. While we make this distinction with regards to the Pāli canon, it is important to remember that these concepts were present from the outset, so that we can understand these practises as being the practises of not only the bodhisattvas, but of the Buddha himself.

We can be strongly reassured by the approach of the founding fathers of the two main schools of the Sanskrit tradition (the *Yogacara* and *Madhyamika*) that there is no contradiction in this holistic view. *Nagarjuna*, *Aryadeva*, *Asanga* *Vasubandhu*, all based their teachings on a thorough investigation of the Pāli textual tradition; the *agamas*. Throughout these two schools, which subsequently spread all over Asia in the forms of *Chitamatrata* (or *Yogacara*) and *Madhyamika*, we find these great masters to be continually quoting the *agamas* in order to define their understanding of Buddhism.

Indeed according to all traditions, the practise of the Buddha can be understood as the practise of the *paramitas* (Pāli: *paramis*) or “perfections”. In the Pāli tradition we find ten paramis, among them the *mettапaramи* (loving kindness) and *upekhaparamи* (equanimity) are found at the culmination of the list. In contrast, the northern schools usually list six perfections: *dana*, *sila*, *kshanti*, *viriya*, *dhyana*, *prajna*.

Rather than being omitted from the six paramitas, we find the importance of the *brahmaviharas* reflected differently in the Northern tradition, for example in Nāgarjuna’s commentary to the Great sūtra of Transcendental Wisdom in 25000 verses and many other works. There we learn that they are actually considered the basis for the acquisition of all the perfections. In other words to develop the power of the mind, one has to practise positive, wholesome perceptions and sensation, leading to enhanced sensitivity (*samvedanā*).

The divine abodes in the buddhist tradition

Across all Buddhist schools the divine abodes consist of *mettā*, *karuna*, *mudita* and *upeka* (Sanskrit: *maitri*, *karuna*, *mudita* and *upeksha*). They are also referred to as the “four immeasurables” (Pali: *apamana*, Sk; *apramāna*), because when cultivated to fruition they are boundless states of consciousness, based on a non-conflicting, or non-differentiating perception and understanding of the objects of mind.

Firstly we will explore these four *cittas* as they are recognised in the Sri Lankan and Burmese traditions, where the interpretation and practises of the Pāli texts have been best preserved. Importantly, in these traditions the object of the four *cittas* are understood to be living beings. This is the basic and primary object, and without understanding this basic object we will not understand how these concepts were eventually further developed in the *prajñaparamita* tradition. In order to do so we will also briefly summarise the main tenets of Buddhist doctrine.

The four noble truths

In Buddhism, the understanding of the fact of our existence is directly linked to understanding the phenomena of suffering (*duhkha*), meaning an unsatisfactory state of existence. Here the root *duh* can be interpreted as “bad” or “suffering” and we can interpret *kha* as referring literary to “sky” or “space”, or more broadly as “existence”. Opposed to the prefix *duh*, is the prefix *su*, meaning *happiness*. So *sukha* is a happy state of being, while *dukkha* is an unpleasant or unhappy state of being; a “bad space” to be in.

As taught in the *nikayas* (for example in *gavampati sutta, satya samyutta SN 56.30*); when one recognises this “unhappy state of being” or suffering, one will automatically also penetrate the cause of suffering, the ending of suffering, and pathway towards the ending of suffering. That is to say, one penetrates the four noble truths, which are the base for all the structure of Buddhist philosophy. This is a philosophy with freedom from *dukkha* as its central platform; so succinctly stated in the third noble truth. With this we know clearly we are working with a soteriology: a study of liberation.

Dependent origination

As students of the buddha dharma will already know, we can further locate at the base of this philosophy the doctrine of “dependent origination” (Pali: *paṭiccasamuppāda*, Sanskrit: *pratityasamutpāda*). Dependent origination thus states that all phenomena arise in dependence upon other dharmas:

“if this exists, that exists; if this ceases to exist, that also ceases to exist” -nidana samyutta.

Dependent origination is a vast topic, and the subject of much discussion which we will not enter in to here, but suffice to say, it is a crucial concept for us to understand, so that it is said:

“One who sees dependent origination sees the Dharma. One who sees the Dharma sees dependent origination.” -MN 28

In the *nidana samyutta* the Buddha further taught that *paṭiccasamuppāda* can be understood in term of chain of twelve links as follows:

Dependent on ignorance, monks, mental dispositions. Dependent on mental dispositions, consciousness. Dependent on consciousness, name and form. Dependent on name and form, the six sense bases. Dependent on the six bases,

contact. Dependent on contact, sensation. Dependent on sensation, thirst. Dependent on thirst, grasping. Dependent on grasping, being. Dependent on being, birth. Dependent on birth, old age and death, sadness, pain, suffering, distress and misery arise. This is the origin of this whole mass of suffering. This, monks, I say is dependent-origination”

The chain as it appears above begins with some quite abstract concepts, such as ignorance, consciousness itself, and “name and form” (*nama-rupa*). But as ordinary living beings we exist in the realms of form and of desire, and thus find ourselves squarely in the middle of this chain. So as practitioners how should we cultivate freedom from within this chain of twelve links of dependent origination? Happily, as well as explaining the penetration of dependent origination from beginning to end and from the end to the beginning, the *Visuddhimagga* also describes its penetration from the middle to the end, and from the middle to the beginning.

A philosophy of touch

Where we find ourselves is indeed in the middle. We are in the middle of the realm of experience of sensations based on touch or “contact” (Pali: *phassa*, Sanskrit: *sparśa*). On the base of contact arise sensations or feelings (*vedanā*). Once sensations lead to desire or thirst (Pali: *tanhā*, Sanskrit: *trshnā*), which is the state of existence of such ordinary beings as ourselves, what necessarily follows will be grasping, and thence existence endowed with *dukhha*. This is so (*tathatā*), and can not be otherwise (*ananyathā*). So we can see that an understanding of *vedanā*, which controls the differentiations of the mundane mind (see for example the *Cūlavedallasutta* MN 44) plays a central role in Buddhist soteriology.

The question is, how to avoid this unsatisfactory state of existence? The Buddha’s prescription is a constant practise of mindfulness (*smṛtiprasthāna*), the essence of which is the four foundations of mindfulness (*satipathanas*). These are the body (*kaya*), sensations (*vedanā*), differentiating mind (*citta*) and its objects (*dhamma*). In the last category, that of mental objects (Pi *dhammas*, Sanskrit: *dharmas*), is especially emphasised the observation of perceptions (*saṃjñā*) and will formations (*abhisamskāras*).

Eleven methods of immortality

In the Buddhist tradition in general the condition for liberation from suffering is the cultivation of three learnings (*śiksashātraya*); ethics (*śīla*), absorption or concentration (*saṃādhi*) and wisdom (Pali: *pañña*, Sanskrit: *prajñā*). According to the theravada tradition the practise of the four immeasurable minds is a practise of special *śīla*, of special *saṃadhi* and of special *pañña*. Thus we find that in the *majjhima nikaya*, the *Atthakanāgara sutta* describes how after the parinirvana of the Buddha, Ananda is asked what is the one quality, which when dwelt in, causes the mind to become released. Cryptically, Ananda enumerates a total of eleven practises: The first seven are the practises of *vipassana* in the four *rūpa* absorptions (Pali: *jhāna*, Sanskrit: *dhyāna*) or *jhāna* of subtle form) and the first three *arūpa* (formless) *jhāna*.

Thanks to the efforts of teachers such as S.N. Goenka the practise of *vipassana* is very widespread in our times. Especially in India we find that most people come into contact with

meditation in this form; the practise of sukha vipassana or so called “easy” or “dry” vipassana. However, when we study the *nikayas* it is especially emphasised that deeper wisdom (*pañña*) is based on the deep *samadhi*, which means the deep practise of *jhāna*, as listed in Ananda’s eleven methods of immortality.

Dhyana as kusalacitta

Now we have mentioned seven absorptions in which according to the Southern Schools one can practise *vipassana*. The other four are enumerated in the *Atthakanāgara sutta* as *samādhi* of the four *brahmaviharas*. We may ask; among the 40 objects offered for meditation in the *Vissudhimagga* for example, why are these four recalled by Ananda as being among the eleven gates of immortality? We learn that the four *brahmaviharas* are also suitable for the cultivation of samadhi.

In fact we find agreement between the *abhidharmakośa* and the Pāli *abhidhamma* that the four *cittas* are actually special states of *samādhi*. Why is this? They are special *samādhi* because the object of the four immeasurables is without limits and subtle, yet does not ignore differentiations which have limits. It can be practised with a mind linked to the sphere of perception bound to the five senses (*kāmadhātu*), in the sphere of subtle forms, and in the formless sphere.

The practise of the four immeasurables thus cannot be separated from the three learnings accepted as the necessary condition for the liberation from suffering. They are to be practised in the mundane sphere of perception, in one pointed concentration and also in the mind freed from the inflow and outflow of impurities into the mind, in the *anāśrāvacitta*. The Buddhas of the three vehicles practise the four immeasurables and the force of their *pāramīs* is linked to the force of their divine abode practise.

Living beings as object

Importantly, in the explanations of the practise of the *brahmavihāras* (se Abhidharmakośa chap.8 etc.) for the śravakas, the sole object of this practise are the living beings. Since living beings are merely a concept (*prajñapti*) existing merely conventionally, but not in the highest reality (*paramārtha*), a disciple of Buddha is taught to combine the practise of the divine abodes with that of the four foundations of mindfulness in order to realise liberation.

So we begin to understand the underlying principle: On the one hand we have as our objects in the four *satipathanas* the body, feelings, mind and objects of mind. Through thorough investigation of these we realise there is nothing in the five aggregates to hold on to. On the other hand, the objects of the *brahmavihāras* are living beings. The emphasis here is that by combining the two practises we are led to the development of the same attitude of non-clinging towards both the five aggregates and to living beings. Finally, through the relinquishing of holding to living beings we attain freedom. In this case freedom is that which comes from realisation of the selflessness of persons.

The divine abodes in the Sanskrit tradition

So having understood a little of their origins in the Pāli tradition, we can move on to briefly explore their development as it is preserved in Sanskrit textual tradition, that of the Bodhisattvas. The realisation of the selflessness of beings is an important part of the insight that in the Mahayana tradition allows the Bodhisattva to live in the world, but yet be free; the central ideal of the Bodhisattva path. It is in this form that Buddhism has spread all over Northern Asia, and we can also understand this spread being not due to any force, but being due to the practise of the *cittas*; of loving kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity

This is one dimension of the greatness of the Buddhist tradition; that it has spread through the cultivation of basically positive attitudes and an attitude of non-fundamentalism. We find in the history of Nalanda University a striking example of this principle. The ancient centre of learning established at Nalanda plays an important role in the development of these attitudes. Indeed His Holiness the Dalai Lama actually defines Tibetan Buddhism as "Nalanda Buddhism". This approach is one that emphasised the development of not only Buddhist doctrines but an understanding in all different areas of learning.

Extending the scope beyond living beings

The Sanskrit tradition based on the transcendental wisdom sūtras extends the scope of the objects of four immeasurables from the basic object being living beings to two complementary objects; they are the dharmas and the ultimate reality. Since living beings do not exist in the ultimate reality, and Buddhas of the three vehicles do not see any real beings, a Bodhisattva practises so that he does not "see" any separately existing beings, yet vowed to save all of them without exception (Diamond sūtra etc.) He also contemplates all dharmas as non-established (*apratishtitha*) (*sāndhinirmocana* chapter 6 etc.).

He thus extends his love and compassion to all the phenomena, without differentiation according to the principle: love opens the heart to virtue so that compassion can perform great deeds (Sanskrit: mahākarma) (Nāgarjuna's commentary to Prajñāparamitāsūtra in 25000 verses). Thus, as master Tzonghapa teaches (Lamrinchenpo) the four immeasurables are blind without three kinds of wisdom: conventional wisdom, the highest or transcendental wisdom, and wisdom of how to benefit sentient beings.

Thus a Bodhisattva is taught to practise love and compassion to get rid of all wrong views and mental perversions (*viparyāsa*), so that joy and equanimity will deprive him of greed (*trshnā*). (see Nāgarjuna, Kumārajīva, Hui yuan, Zhi yi etc.) This is how wisdom based on the profound understanding of the four immeasurables, whose very essence is wisdom, becomes a vehicle for liberation due to the cultivation of the four immeasurables.

Not holding on

So we have learned that the process of cultivating *kusala citta* is actualised when we don't hold to sensations. We have further learned that sensation co-arises dependent on contact. This leads us inevitably to ask, contact with what? And the answer here is with living beings. As anyone will know from their own experience, for us the most important source of akusalā citta is none other than living beings. Indeed living beings are the main objects of our defilements, of our grasping and aversion, all of which are also necessarily based on our

experience of sensations. Therefore as soon as one holds to *vedanā* one holds to living beings. When we hold to living beings, we hold to *vendantā*, and when we hold to *vedanā* it becomes a contradictory *vedanā*, not a pure *vedanā*. And the contradictory *vedanā* is the source of *kleśa*. We are subjected to *kleśa* because we have contradictory *vedanā*. So it is precisely in order to avoid contradictory *vedanā* that we practise the four “divine abodes of the mind”; love, compassion, joy and equanimity. When you cultivate and stay in the *samadhi* of these “supreme dwellings”, this is the best way to purify the mind.

Dwelling in the pure land.

According to the Chinese tradition dwelling in pure *vedanā* is also the base for dwelling in the pure land. The practise of the bodhisattva path is the practise of the pure land. Staying in the pure land means staying in the pure sensations. This is emphasised especially in Chinese Buddhism. Huyen who is one of the founders of the pure land tradition says that we practise love and compassion in order to get rid of wrong view. You will find the same idea in Nagarjuna’s work also; we are subjected to the wrong view because we don’t have sufficient love and compassion.

As we have learned, the Pāli *agamas* tell us that because living beings are the object of the *brahmaviharas*, in order to get liberation we must combine their practise with that of the four foundations of mindfulness. Unless we combine them we cannot get liberation. But in the Sanskrit tradition one finds a different picture; here there is a tendency (for example in the commentary of *abhidharmakośa* - *abhidharmakośabhasya*) to extend the scope of the object (*alambana*) of the four *brahmaviharas* not only to living beings but also to *dharma*s. In fact the object is extended not only to *dharma*s but also to *paramartha* itself, to the highest reality.

Skillful means

While the Pāli tradition tends to emphasise the inner wisdom (*adhyātmikavidyā*) as being the vehicle for liberation, the tradition related to the path of Bodhisattvas tend to stress the development of skilful means (*upāya*), integrated into the practise of the perfections, which is the path of Bodhisattvas. So we have learned that one practising the path of the perfections has the aim of becoming a *satpurusha*, a good person capable of helping many beings. In the Nalanda tradition this means not only the study of “inner science” or *adhyatmika vidya*, but also the study of a broad range of sciences.

Thus, the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* of the *Yogacarabhūmiśastra* includes the study of medicine, logic, etymology, and fine arts (*śilpa*) among the subjects to be mastered. A similar trend is observed in the explanation of the practise of the *pāramitās*; here connected with the four bases for gathering beings to the *dharma* (*catvārisamgrahavastūni*), including *arthakriyā*, doing good deeds for the benefit of sentient beings and *samatā*, treating them without discrimination.

Purifying our intention

In this perspective we see that the original scope of the four *cittas* underwent further development in the Sanskrit tradition. To bring the benefits of the teachings to all stratas of society means not only the study of the path to personal enlightenment but such a broad

view of knowledge as was encouraged at Nalanda. This is indeed the greatness of Buddhism: all people without exception, can benefit from the Buddhist teachings to cultivate the qualities of a *satpurusha*. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama encourages, we can use buddhist perspectives to become better in whatever one is doing.

As in the Pāli tradition, the sanskrit tradition emphasises the buddhist path as being founded on the practise of love. Here the *Brahmaviharas* are a practise which purifies the intention (*āshaya*). A correct intention, a correct practise and a correct resolve (*adhyāshaya*) make the mind powerful. The *Samādhirājasūtra* teaches that one thought of *maitrī* has a more powerful effect than countless offerings. In order to develop such a powerful mind, the scriptures suggest the practise of a mundane *samādhi*, which the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* of the *Yogacarabhūmiśastra* calls the *satpurusha samādhi*.

So at the core of the practise still we find the simple aim of becoming a good person, and for that we are taught we need to cultivate great love and compassion. The *Śūrangamasamādhi sūtra* further explains that in order to succeed in the *Bodhisattva* practise one has to practise *mahāmaitri*, followed by *mahākarunā*, then the four *brahmaviraras* as the whole. It is explained that this will lead to the acquisition of the five mundane supernatural powers (*panchābhijñā*). So we learn that cultivating great love and compassion cannot succeed without perfecting joy and equanimity, and that the result will be the mastery of the mind.

Conclusion

The four brahmaviharas are a fundamental practise in all Buddhist scriptures. From the earliest interpretations we understand love, compassion, joy and equanimity as being cultivated in regard to living beings. For the disciples of the Buddha, liberation comes from not grasping to these very beings, so that along with *metta*, *karuna* and *mudita*, comes *upekha*. This is the basic concept of the *brahmaviharas*: that to realise true happiness we must practise love, but without attachment. For love is the most liberating force in our mind but it can also be the most binding force of our mind. In Plato's "Symposium On Love" we find that even the Greek philosopher Socrates says "the father of love is wisdom and the mother of love is dukkah". We living beings are, so to say, born from this contradiction of joy and suffering, and this very contradiction we can solve by deep practise of love, compassion, joy and equanimity.